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The Shifting Chinese Public Image of the United States

by Ming Zhang

Summary

- There appears to be a broad public expression of anti-U.S. sentiment across China.
- Anti-U.S. sentiment may be prompted by perceived hostile U.S. actions, such as blocking China's bid to host the 2000 Olympics and dispatching aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait.
- Negative public sentiment in both China and the United States could lead to a further deterioration in the relationship between the two countries.
- To avoid further deterioration, a working mechanism should be established through which Washington can consistently engage Beijing in dialogue at the highest level.

Chinese Perception of the United States

The Clinton Administration has vigorously pursued a comprehensive engagement policy toward China. This policy has demonstrated its merit during the past difficult years. When U.S. National Security Advisor Anthony Lake visited Beijing in July 1996, Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian endorsed the U.S. engagement policy toward China. Top Chinese officials have seldom described the policy of the United States towards China as containment, considering the long-term significance of Sino-U.S. relations. Despite diplomatic efforts at the highest level, the Chinese government is unsure of U.S. engagement policy goals. China's continued suspicion can be read through the reactions of scholars and other public groups. Surprisingly, the interviewees for this essay share a common view about the United States and its policy toward China.

In Shanghai, a senior fellow of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies expresses his concerns about U.S. intentions in Asia. In addition to human rights, trade, and intellectual property rights criticisms, the scholar points to the establishment of the U.S.-Vietnamese diplomatic relationship, the U.S. influence on North Korea, and a potential U.S. plot in Hong Kong. He suspects that the United States would implement its containment policy through those steps. Another scholar at Fudan University states that the United States has clearly tightened its China policy by Westernizing, dividing, and containing China. Some Chinese military officers suspect that the United States is using the U.S.-Japan alliance as a means to deal with China. Many Chinese civilian and military analysts expect Japan to be

the greatest threat to China by 2020. At present, China criticizes Japan for spreading the China Threat theory.

The greatest puzzle facing Chinese scholars and analysts is determining what the United States intends to do about Taiwan. What does the United States really want out of the Taiwan issue? A senior fellow at the Shanghai Institute for International Studies asks if it is independence. A scholar at Fudan argues that Taiwan once promised a one-China policy, but is now changing its stand; the United States' one-China policy could also be changed. A reporter in Hong Kong believes that the United States is using arms sales to control the military balance between Taiwan and China. He argues that a divided China suits U.S. interests, but a united China would force the U.S. defense line to step back.

The scholars' views of the United States coincide with others in the Chinese public. In Jiangsu Province, local cadres complain that the United States does not want China to be strong but it attempts to damage China's economy-China's foreign trade, for example. They also note that the United States dispatched two aircraft carriers to help Taiwan even though the United States did not really want to fight for Taiwan. They assert that Taiwan cannot be independent, and China must defend its territorial integrity. The Chinese public still respects advanced development in the United States but thinks that the United States has overestimated China's power. One local official says that China probably has 80 million people who do not have enough food to eat.

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In talking about the future of Sino-U.S. relations, students and faculty of Zhongshan University in Guangzhou express pessimism. A reason for this pessimism, a student suggests, is that China and the United States will fight for limited natural resources in the future because the two countries will have the largest economies. The student reasons that the United States fought for oil in the Middle East. Furthermore, an associate professor of Zhongshan believes that due to shortages in natural resources Western economies will encounter great chaos in 15 years. By then, the Western economy will partly shift to other countries and clash with the native economies. Technology cannot solve all the problems.

The associate professor notes that the United States is not consistent in its China policy: politics follows one policy, economics another. An assistant professor at Zhongshan suggests that the Sino-U.S. relationship is the continuation of the Russo-U.S. relationship-China is the new challenge to the United States: politically, economically, and culturally. Many students agree that ideology and history play key roles in international relations. They warn that if the United States bullies China too much today, China will seek revenge tomorrow.

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These public views are not isolated rhetoric. Similar arguments are the main themes in numerous monographs published in 1996, such as China That Can Say No, or, Trials of Strength Between China and the United States. (China That Can Say No by Song Qiang, Zhang Zangzang, Qiao Bian, "Zhongguo Keyi Shuo Bu" Beijing: Zhonghua Gongshang Lianhe Chubanshe, 1996, and Trials of Strength Between China and the United States by Chen Feng, et al., "Zhongmei Jiaoliang" Beijing: Zhongguo Renshi Chubanshe, 1996).

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For example, China That Can Say No proposes that because "containment of China" has become the United States long-term strategy, counter-containment should become China's long-term strategy. Trials of Strength Between China and the United States concludes that U.S. pressure on China has resulted in conflicts over issues such as Taiwan, textile trade, human rights, the most-favored nation status, and arms sales. As a whole, the Chinese are confident, proud, and patriotic. Toward the United States, they are disappointed, frustrated, angered, and somewhat aggressive.

Nationalism and Sino-U.S. Relations

According to Chinese polls, the United States was ranked No. 1 among the most disliked foreign countries (31.3 percent) in October 1994 and again as No. 1 (57.2 percent) in May 1995 by Chinese youth (Zhongguo Qingnian Bao [Chinese Youth Daily], May 1996). Chinese Youth Daily, an official newspaper published in Beijing, has a large audience among Chinese youth, especially college students and intellectuals.

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Nationalism in today's China has been generated by both domestic success and external pressure, but mainly it has been prompted by the perception that there are hostile foreign forces. Many Chinese would point to the United States as a "black hand" behind Taiwan or as a "liar" about China's human rights. The arms sales to Taiwan, including the recent Stinger anti-aircraft missiles deal, have strengthened the Chinese perception.

What does Chinese nationalism mean for the United States and its China policy? First of all, we must recognize the fact that the nationalist wave in China is a broad-based public reaction to a series of international events. The Chinese public came to their own conclusions simply because they were upset about losing the opportunity to host the 2000 Olympic Games in Beijing, and the violent foreign attempt to "save" a child (Taiwan) from their motherland, among other displeasures and humiliations. For the first time since the Sino-U.S. diplomatic normalization in 1979, the Chinese public has developed radical views while the leadership remains calm. Such nationwide sentiment, seen by this author as profound and perhaps long-lasting, may or may not be correlated with government policy. Therefore, the current improvement of Sino-U.S. relations at the official level may not immediately change the Chinese attitude at the public level.

Second, it is important to note that the Chinese government does not appear to have launched a major anti-American public affairs effort throughout China. The United States has neither been consistently defined as a threat nor as an enemy except during the Taiwan crisis in early 1996. Chinese leaders have been clearly aware of its common economic and security interests with the United States.

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Third, all things considered, China has not shifted away from its economic-centered national goals. A major war is not in China's interest, nor of its concern. Whereas nationalism is rising, the Chinese government is putting more emphasis on economic and political stability, as well as on international peace. China's modernization will continue to depend on cooperation with the United States and Japan, despite increasing frictions among the three countries. Thus, China's foreign policy will seek cooperation

instead of confrontation due to its fundamental political and economic interests.

Fourth, Chinese nationalism has posed a challenge for the United States policy concerning China. Similarly vehement sentiment in both countries could lead to an unwanted confrontation. The United States needs to reexamine what kind of policy is appropriate for its interests in China in particular, and in Asia more generally. American criticism of China seems to generate only harsh reactions from the Chinese people. The lack of mutual understanding and the lack of broader, multi-level contacts remain the key reason for the stalemate in the Sino-U.S. relationship.

Recommendations

- A working mechanism should be established between the United States and China. It is crucial that Washington consistently engage Beijing in dialogue at the highest level. Consistency and persistence become more important as the Chinese leadership becomes increasingly uncertain about U.S. intentions toward China.
- Since the priority and significance of high-level official meetings have often been interrupted by unexpected events, a dialogue between "hostile" elements of both countries—for example, between Chinese "hardliners" and American human rights activists—should be conducted in the future.
- American scholars and officials should understand not only Chinese officials, but also the Chinese public. It would be dangerous if we continue to ignore public sentiment in both China and the United States.

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